Friends of
Holt Island
Nature Reserve

Spring Newsletter
2025
ISSUE 55

SAVE THE DATE!
Annual Meeting
Thursday 17th July, 7pm

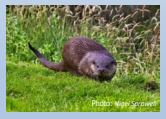
Friends of Holt Island Nature Reserve

ANNUAL MEETING 2025

Otters

We are delighted to welcome **Peter Pilbeam**, a founder member of Cambs Mammal Group who will tell us all we ever wanted to know about the elusive otter

Thursday 17th July
St Ives Corn Exchange 7pm – 9pm



Free pizza, cake and soft drinks from 7.00 pm. At 7.30 pm we will be officially launching our new aerial video of the Island. A short AGM will be followed by a compilation of very special webcam footage taken on the Island. Our talk will begin at 8.00 pm.

Everyone is welcome – please email meeting@holtisland.org to reserve a place, to help us with numbers for catering.

www.holtisland.org

like us on facebook:
Holt Island Nature Reserve

Visit our website:
www.holtisland.org

The Friends Group is a voluntary organisation dedicated to the promotion and protection of Holt Island in St Ives for the enjoyment of all.

Registered Charity Number: 1198894

The Islander

Newsletter of the Friends of Holt Island Nature Reserve

CHAIR'S NOTE

It was touch and go, but we were able to re-open the Island as planned on 19th April. It has been a difficult winter, with major damage to the boardwalk caused by a falling tree. Hours of cold, muddy work by the Island's dedicated volunteers, guided by the District Council Rangers, has repaired the damage. This has been on top of winter maintenance - pollarding osiers, clearing areas of reed to allow re-growth and installing a new picnic table. It is wonderful to have people back on the Island, enjoying themselves. A very big thank you to everyone involved.

Our summer visitors are also back on the Island. Chiffchaffs were singing from mid-March, and they have been joined by Blackcaps, Sedge and Reed Warblers, and Corn Buntings. Bird ringing tells us that quite a few of these are 'returners'. Our 'residents' are well-represented, too. A pair of swans have nested on the edge of the reedbed (photos to follow in our summer issue), and pair of grebes opposite The Waits. Butterflies and insects are making the most of our unseasonably warm weather, although some vegetation – especially the ivy – appears to have suffered from the frequent floods.

A lot is happening over the summer, including our Family Fun Day on 19th August, guided walks during Green Week (details on back page) and several school and community group visits. All these

The Great Crested Grebe with her chick – nest opposite The Waits. Photo: Nigel Sprowell

activities are managed carefully and sensitively because we are, above all, a nature reserve. Our Annual Meeting is on 17th July (details below), which will be a celebration of the work of our volunteers together with a fascinating talk about otters… with perhaps some advice on how we can encourage them to set up home in our purpose-built otter holt that they have so far avoided. Do join us - there is no charge.

And finally, Paul Claydon, who has been our HDC Ranger for an incredible 18 years is stepping back from Holt Island duties, although not stepping away completely. Paul has done so much for the Island, it's impossible to sum it all up in a sentence. Thank you for everything, and especially your volunteer lunches! We welcome Sam Dobson as our new Ranger.

Keith Grimwade

FOHINR ANNUAL MEETING 2025

Our Annual Meeting will be held on Thursday 17th July at the Corn Exchange in St Ives. The event starts at 7pm with free pizza, cake and soft drinks and a chance to mingle and chat.

The highlight of the evening will be a fascinating talk about otters by Peter Pilbeam, a founder member of the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group. Peter has been looking after the wild mammals of the County for approaching 50 years. Peter will tell us about otters in the UK and their habitats, related species, sightings (or lack of them), lifestyle, behaviour and diet. He will include (and display) details of the county's five-yearly survey for signs of otters and information about the sixth National Otter Survey.

The evening will also provide the opportunity to see a stunning short video; 'The Secrets of Holt Island', by David Brooks, a Friend of Holt Island Nature Reserve. In addition to the brief Annual General Meeting, we will also be sharing more superb trailcam footage of sightings on the Island, including our very own otter!

We look forward to seeing you there. To assist us in catering planning would you please confirm your attendance by emailing meeting@holtisland.org stating how many will be attending.

Photo: Nigel Sprowell

REINVIGORATING THE REEDBED

The reedbeds have been a feature of the eastern end of Holt Island since the 1930s, when reeds began to colonise an area of previously open water. A century later, the beds are thickening and can appear as dry land, but are still floating: it is possible to push a pole through into clear water less than a metre below.

The combination of sedge and reed debris, and silt trapped during the recurrent floods means that the reedbeds are elevating, and showing signs of potential succession as willow is attempting to advance from behind. The result of these changes appeared to be that the core of the reedbed was less attractive to the summer breeding bird community, which largely used the riverine margins of the bed. These margins, from visual inspection, seemed taller and greener than the core.

Sedge Warbler Photo: Nigel Sprowell

In order to see if the core could be reinvigorated, and if so, might be able to return the area of usable bed for warblers, we decided to establish two trial cut areas and monitor both the growth of the plants and the use of the areas by birds for two years.

Two zones in the reedbed were cut in January 2023. Leaving a 3m margin at the river's edge, Zones 1 and 2 were cut in a NE direction up to the edge of the willow margin flanking the Waits. All cut material in the zones was cleared and stacked offsite.

After clearance, two 1m x 1m plots (called plots A and B) in Zones 1 and 2 were cleared and marked out for future recording. B was closest to the river and A to the Waits. Plots were marked on each corner by cut willow wands , inserted upside down (in the hope that they would not grow) and locatable by white marker flags. These were taken out at the end of summer in 2024 after the last round of recording.

To act as controls, and provide a comparison to the cut areas, two control plots were marked out in the adjacent uncut

Female Reed Bunting Photo: Nigel Sprowell

reedbed. These were also marked by willow wands.

As the objective of the study was to see how the reedbed would respond to being cut, the plant composition of the quadrats in Zones 1 and 2 was recorded by Veronica Bonnet every 2-3 weeks in spring and summer in 2023, and every three or so weeks in 2024. Frequency depended on the flood regime of the river, which limited accessibility at various points across both years.

For each quadrat plot the numbers of plants, their species and height were recorded, and by subdividing the plot into smaller units, the position of each plant was noted; allowing an understanding of spatial change over time. As well as the botanical recording, all areas were covered as part of a spring/ summer bird mapping census, allowing an assessment of the ways in which the various sections of the reedbed were being used.

In 2024, two further control plots were measured at the end of the growing season, in this case, both were in the riverine margin, providing a yardstick of active edge growth.

Fox asleep in the reedbed: still from our trailcam footage Nigel Sprowell

Table 1: variation in reed heights (cm) between plots within and between years

Year	Zone Plot 1A	Zone Plot 1B	Zone Plot 2A	Zone Plot 2B	Control A	Control B	River Edge 1	River Edge 2
2023	210-230	210-260	210-220	210-260	210-280	220-280	-	-
2024	250-267	240-262	230-281	230-270	220-261	230-264	250-270	250-274

In 2023 the cleared zones grew rapidly, overlapping in height with the controls by the end of the season. By 2024 the plots were generally higher than the controls, and as tall or taller than the river edge plots. Whilst the plots that were cut in 2023 had grown taller in 2024, the controls were shorter than the previous year.

So, we have a physically recovered bed, but what of the birds? In 2023, the regrowing bed was being used by the mid/end of the season, and the control area was occasionally used. In 2024, the number of bird registrations in the regrown areas was up, matching the riverine edge, and more than in the control areas and older reedbed. Birds were observed fighting in the regrowth areas, and carrying food items into the zone: suggesting that, from a bird point of view, the cutting and clearing had reinvigorated the reedbed.

What next? Two areas where the bed seems thinner, and more overgrown with bindweed and hops will be cut in late winter 2024/5. It should be noted that both bindweed and hops occurred in the regrowth reedbed plots, but neither did well as the reinvigorated reed cover closed in and blocked out light in both years.

Tim Reed

Reed Warbler Photo: Nigel Sprowell

The cut slots on the reedbed on Holt Island in January 2023. Photo: David Brooks (X-Copters Aerial Media)

WOW! WALK THE OUSE VALLEY WAY DAY ON 20TH JULY

The Ouse Valley Way is a 150 mile route following the River Great Ouse from its source in Syresham, Northamptonshire to the Wash near King's Lynn. Holt Island is immediately adjacent to the route.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust (GOVT) was set up to protect, promote and enhance the special landscape of the Great Ouse Valley. FOHINR is a partner member.

GOVT is promoting the Cambridgeshire section of the Ouse Valley Way on their WOW! Walk the Ouse Valley Way day on Sunday 20 July. Information hubs will be available along the route. In St Ives the hub will be located at the Norris Museum and here there will be information about what to see, details of circular walks and maps and walking guides.

More information can be found here:

https://greatousevalleytrust.org.uk/walk-the-ouse-valley-way or by scanning the QR code.

HOLT ISLAND'S ST IVES GREEN WEEK EVENTS

St Ives Green Week (7th – 15th June) is the town's contribution to the national Great Big Green Week - the UK's biggest celebration of action to protect and restore nature, lessen the impact of climate change, strengthen our communities and build a future we're proud to pass on to the next generation. There is a full programme of events that you can view here: https://www.greatbiggreenweek.com/stivesgreenweek/st_ives_cambs_green_week

In addition to the weekends, the Island will be open Monday to Friday, from 10am – 4pm. We are also offering FREE guided tours of the Island on Friday 13th June at 11am – 12.15pm and 2pm – 3.15pm, and on Saturday 14th June at 11am – 12.15pm. These short walks will be an opportunity to learn about the history, fauna and flora of our wonderful Island. Booking is essential because places are limited: please email chair@holtisland.org to reserve a place. Meet at the White Bridge.

Have you heard the cuckoos? Both a male and female cuckoo have been seen (and heard!) on the Island. Photo: Nigel Sprowell

Chair: KEITH GRIMWADE keith.grimwade@btinternet.com 07833 224949
Treasurer: BASIL BELCHER treasurer@holtisland.org 07704 142990
Secretary: HELEN CRIPPS secretary@holtisland.org
Membership Secretary: JAMES KNIGHT membership@holtisland.org

Committee Members:

JILL BURT jillburt@btinternet.com 07796 326931
PAUL CLAYDON (HDC Ranger) paul.claydon@huntingdonshire.gov.uk 07810 637545
KEITH GRIMWADE keith.grimwade@btinternet.com 07833 224949
IAN JACKSON ian89424@gmail.com 07836 248360
JULIAN LIMENTANI limentani@aol.com 07802 166722
NIGEL SPROWELL nigel.sprowell@btopenworld.com 07899 908336
DAVID STREET dgstreet@btinternet.com 07938 141201
TIM REED dr.tim.reed@btinternet.com